

Background Conferences Backfire

By Drew Pearson

The public doesn't generally realize it, but one of the chief techniques of getting news out to the press in the last three years has been through off-the-record conferences.

This is a device whereby a small group of newsmen are invited to dinner or cocktails with a high official who proceeds to unload certain ideas he wants to get across and which can be published provided his name isn't mentioned. This puts him in a position where he can duck or deny if the information backfires and where the newsmen are left holding the bag.

Some newsmen have been burnt so many times with these confidential news conferences that they won't attend any more.

Here are a few illustrations of how these so-called off-the-record sessions backfire and why the public has a hard time knowing what's really happening in Washington.

Carney Backfire—On March 24 Admiral Carney, then Chief of Naval Operations, told a private dinner of newsmen that his intelligence gave every indication the Chinese Reds would attack Quemoy and Matsu Islands off the coast of China by April 15. When this was published without attribution to Carney, but with the Washington press knowing Carney was the source, Jim Hagerly, White House press secretary, held another off-the-record dinner with newsmen and denied that any such attack was imminent.

By this time everyone was completely confused. The confusion was compounded, however, when Adm. Carney issued a flat denial that he had ever said anything whatsoever about an attack in mid-April.

At this point newsmen attending his private huddle produced their verbatim notes showing he had said just exactly that.

Dulles Backfire—While the Korean war was still on, Secretary of State Dulles officiated at a secret huddle with a few choice newsmen at which he said the United States would accept a United Nations trusteeship over Formosa; would also accept a truce line drawn through the narrow waist of Korea. In the end, of course, he accepted a line considerably south of the waist.

After news accounts based on his conference were published without mentioning Dulles, Sen. Knowland of California rushed down to the

White House, and the White House issued a denial that any such ideas—as those expounded by Dulles—were contemplated. Knowland also stated on Capitol Hill: "I telephoned John Foster Dulles and he assured me no such statement had come from him."

Next day, the Secretary of State sat in a staff conference at which advisers speculated regarding the source of the news stories they had just read in the papers. They had no idea their chief was the real source.

"I'll bet," remarked Assistant Secretary of State Carl McCordle, "that it was that man C. D. Jackson."

He was referring to one of the top members of the Time-Life-Fortune hierarchy then working as adviser to the White House.

"I wouldn't talk like that," remarked Under Secretary of State Bedell Smith. "My experience in Government is that remarks like that always leak back to the man you're talking about."

Secretary Dulles, the man responsible for the story, said nothing.

Political Backfires—Political denials are generally taken with more skepticism than the average run of denials. But some editors feel that they must be headlined even though fully aware of their inaccuracy.

One interesting denial, with a recent sequel, occurred when Chalmers Roberts of The Washington Post and Times Herald published an exclusive account of the refusal of Gov. Averell Harriman of New York to make a speech for Americans for Democratic Action when requested to do so by his old friend and former D. C. campaign manager, Joe Rauh.

When Rauh, head of ADA, urged Harriman to accept, Harriman was quoted as saying, "I'm not running out on ADA the way your friend Adlai Stevenson did."

Finally he was quoted as shouting at Rauh, "Get out of here."

Next day Gov. Harriman issued the usual political denial. He called the story "perfectly ridiculous."

James Russell Wiggins, editor of The Washington Post and Times Herald, and one of the best in the business, knowing the source of the story, knowing its accuracy, nevertheless felt it necessary to play up the denial. He really had to, because Harriman, unlike the off-the-record diners, at heart made his statement on the record. However, net result was to make it almost impossible for the reading public to ascertain who was telling the truth.

The sequel occurred just a few days ago. Harriman had long promised a contribution

to ADA, but had long delayed giving it. He gave no reason, but presumably he was irritated over The Washington Post and Times Herald story, which he attributed to Rauh.

Finally on the day after Sen. Herbert Lehman of New York announced, Oct. 20, that

he was supporting Adlai Stevenson, not Harriman, for President, Harriman sent his belated contribution to ADA. Furthermore, he rushed it down to Rauh within a matter of hours, by messenger, his personal friend, George Backer. It was a check for \$250.



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